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THE  
BELFAST MONTHLY MAGAZINE.

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COMMUNICATIONS, ORIGINAL AND SELECTED.

*For the Belfast Monthly Magazine.*

OBSERVATIONS ON THE THREE REPORTS OF  
THE COMMISSIONERS OF THE BOARD OF  
EDUCATION IN IRELAND.

ACCORDING to the proverb, "better late than never," it is satisfactory to perceive, that after so many years of mismanagement, Commissioners have been appointed to examine into the application of the large funds, which have been allotted for the avowed purpose of promoting education in Ireland. The funds are great, and the question is naturally suggested, how far they have answered the purpose for which they were nominally appropriated. Funds allotted by the Parliament of Scotland, vastly inferior in magnitude, have produced much good, while but little has been effected in this land of jobs, by the enormous appropriation of lands and money for a great length of time. The reason is obvious: in Scotland, the sums were small, too limited for the extension of patronage, and were managed by those who paid the tax, and who would consequently be jealous of any misapplication of the funds. In Ireland, on the contrary, the funds were large, and afforded to our civil and ecclesiastical rulers the sweets of patronage. From these considerations it is not probable that such a system of national education, as is detailed in these reports, is likely to be well managed. The people may, perhaps, be allowed to tax themselves to support and extend such establishments, but so long as the patronage is vested in Government, the interests of the few will preponderate over the general good, and the patronage in appointing so many school masters, will only have the tendency to increase that overwhelming influence, which some years

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ago, in rather better times than the present, was by high authority declared "to have increased, was then increasing, and ought to be diminished."

The selection of the Commissioners affords room to doubt the efficacy of this commission. A high dignitary of the church has an overwhelming influence, and may reasonably be expected to be so attached to that system from which he draws his emoluments, as to be on the watch that the church receive no damage; and throughout these reports we perceive the predominating sentiment, that the Protestantism of the establishment shall maintain its ascendancy. Other Commissioners, leagued with a chief of supreme authority, must be cautious not to advance any sentiment which may not square with preconceived opinions, and much concession and compromise will necessarily be the result; and concession and compromise weaken the force of a searching and thorough-going inquiry. How far a national system of education, in a nation where a great proportion of the expense is borne by dissenters of different kinds, ought to embrace the exclusive advantage of one sect, and be accommodated to its interests, shall be deferred to the succeeding part of this essay, when the subject of Charter-schools shall pass under review.

In the first place, it is necessary to advert to the first report of the Commissioners. This relates wholly to the endowed schools, which by a misnomer have been denominated free-schools. The funds have been diverted to the private emolument of him, who has the interest to get himself appointed master. In some places no school has been regularly kept up, and in those schools which are not mere sinecures, no reduction in the

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prices charged for board or education appears to have taken place in consequence of the high endowments, nor any boys taken on the foundation, except in the school of Raphoe, where three are instructed, though this latter plan is now recommended in one part of the Report.

The disposition of the masters to consider the trust as entirely for their own private emolument, is further evinced by the sacrifice of the interest of the successor, by granting a lease in trust to some friend, for the advantage of the family of the master, after his decease, when the present master has sufficient interest to procure such a trust lease. It is satisfactory to observe, that this practice is rather blamed by the Commissioners; and it would afford additional satisfaction, if active legislative measures were speedily adopted to prevent the recurrence of such a practice.

It may be noticed with satisfaction, that the Report states favourably the management of the schools of Armagh and Enniskillen. The master of the school at Dungannon receives, very properly, from his age and infirmities, a hint to retire. The schools of Cavan, Banagher, and Carysfort, according to this Report, afford striking proofs of extreme misapplication of the funds. This part of the Report is a useful comment on the liability of public institutions to become scandalously abused.

The second Report relates to two schools of private foundation. The schools of Navan and Ballyronan appear to be very badly conducted, and to have been hitherto almost entirely subservient to private emolument, as the master of both, till very lately, was the same person, and he never discharged the duties of either in person. It is particularly deserving of notice, that the highly endowed Protestant school of Navan is not well attended, because children are educated on lower terms at the unendowed Catholic school in that town.

The circumstances of these two schools show how easily the intentions of a benevolent testator may be frustrated, by the manner in which his intentions may be prevented from

being carried into execution. Surely it is better for persons of affluence to do good in their life-time, and not leave the execution of their good intentions to be marred by their successors. A love of posthumous fame may sometimes induce the making of such bequests: sometimes also more laudable motives may actuate. But the glaring mismanagement which is here recorded, operates as a discouragement to the purest, and most benevolent motives. A school supported by annual subscriptions, and managed by those who contribute, and can best controul the appropriation of the funds, by their personal attention, is attended with greater probability of success, than when the funds are drawn from other sources. If, in such a case, the funds are less permanent, this disadvantage is more than compensated by the greater care with which subscribers superintend the expenditure of their own money, and by the preventive checks thus provided against that system of jobbing into which public institutions are so liable to fall. The annual renewal of subscriptions, infuses new vigour into institutions, solely or in great measure dependent on them for support.

In considering the third Report, which solely relates to the Protestant Charter-schools, many serious objections present against this system of making converts—which, after many years of trial, has been found ineffectual to promote the end in view, “the conversion of the lower orders of the inhabitants of Ireland from Popery.” Many, perhaps it may be said most, educated in these schools, have not continued in the Protestant persuasion, and the prejudice against them was formerly so strong, that it is mentioned in the Report of Shannon-grove Nursery, as given in the Appendix, “that the country people used to beat the carriers who were employed to remove the children to other schools; but they did not do so now, but often took that opportunity of decoying them away.”—Such attempts are naturally to be expected, especially when for a time these schools were almost exclusively confined to children of Catholics. Now, admission is open to the children of Protestants, as appears to be consistent with the words of the

original charter. It is not reasonable to expect that parents would readily surmount their objections to give up their children to be educated in a faith contrary to their own; and such who would most readily consent, it may be expected, were generally the most inconsiderate and profligate, who, to get rid of the expense of maintaining their children, would thus permit them to be withdrawn from them.

The plan of charter-schools contains so many and great radical defects, that we fear no measures short of an entire change of system, can cure them. Dr. Drennan, in his letter to the Earl of Fitzwilliam, written in 1795, thus characterises them, and shows the pernicious tendency of this exclusive system:—

“MY LORD,

“I do request you will take the trouble of reading the account of this inveterately-illiberal institution in any common almanack, and every line will, I think, carry its own reprobation to an ingenuous mind. ‘The children,’ as it is regulated in this unnatural system, ‘are all placed in schools *remote* from their former abodes,’ or, in other words, they are torn from all the sweet associations that attend the interesting idea of home. This is indeed a charity which thrives on the extinction of all other charities of life; and the feelings of nature must be eradicated before they can become nurslings of the state. They are banished from their vicinage to a remote quarter of the kingdom, where all traces and ties of kindred are lost and cut off; all habitudes of the heart smothered in the cradle; and when sent into the world, they know not the spot which gave them birth, the mother that bore them, nor the blood that flows in their veins. I think of the speech of Logan, the Indian Chief, when all his kindred were murdered by the English: ‘There runs not a drop of my blood in the veins of any living creature!’ It is a cold, a cheerless, and a forlorn feeling of this nature, which must freeze the young blood, and placing the mind in a state of sullen insulation, makes its re-action upon society rather dangerous than beneficial. The ties of kindred operate as a sort of external consci-

ence upon the conduct of men, deterring them from the commission of great crimes, for the fear of disgrace, which would be reflected upon their relatives. There is a family pride, a domestic honour, among the very poorest and lowest of the community, that guards and sanctions, and is a sort of God for the little household. Even the highest have such workings of nature, and Lady Macbeth exclaims, ‘Had he not resembled *my father* when he slept, I had done’t.’ The imagined countenance of her father was the only conscience left, and came between her and murder. But charter-school policy makes a sort of massacre of all those domestic moralities which operate upon character and conduct, without being able, in the present state of Ireland, to put a higher and nobler principle of action in their place; and thus, I fear, this same policy has bred up many victims for the laws, while they only thought of making proselytes to a religion.”

While the radical principle is bad, and an exclusive spirit pervades the entire system, as may appear from the 71st rule, for their government.—“No person is appointed a member of the local committee, of any school or nursery under the direction of the incorporated society, who is not a Protestant of the Church of England as by law established, and well affected to his Majesty’s government;” little good can be expected from this plan to manufacture Protestants. It is only combating prejudice, by another set of prejudices. The system of education wanting in Ireland, is not the inculcation of dogmas, as we are told is necessary, by one of the commissioners, R. L. Edgeworth, in his letter to the board of education, published in the appendix, but to teach the youth, to read and write, and having thus opened the avenues to the acquisition of further instruction, leave them to form their own creed, on the increased evidences, which by such means may be put within their reach. A national education being at a public expense should not be confined to the furtherance of the religion of a part.—Divided as we are in Ireland, on

religious subjects, morality, in the necessity of which all are agreed, and not speculative tenets, respecting which such diversity prevails, should form the only principle, on which a system of national instruction should be laid; if this primary rule is not attended to, all other plans will be radically defective; the patronage of government may be increased, but the good of the people will not be promoted. So strongly are some impressed with this sentiment, that much as education is wanting in Ireland they would prefer to see things remain as they are, rather than by the unwise policy of an extension of the Charter-school system, add to the dissensions already so prevalent in this country.

It is pleasant to understand from the report that these schools have been greatly improved, in the course of the last ten years, and that the very objectionable formula, entitled the Protestant Catechism, has been latterly discontinued; but after all, with such magnificent funds, which amounted in last year (exclusive of the parliamentary grant of nearly £20,000) to £9765 9s. 7d. it is obvious that as much good has not been done, as might have been effected by the judicious application of such large means, on a truly enlightened plan.

If Charter-schools, under all their disadvantages, have done some good, by bringing up a number of poor and destitute children, to habits of industry, and qualifying them to be useful members of society, much more might have been effected on a more liberal plan.

Some objections may also be made to the scheme of farming out the children to the master or mistress, both as to their providing food for the children, and drawing emolument from their labour, and also to the ineffectual check of local committees on abuses that may arise from the frauds of the masters, more especially, as complaint is made, that local committees, with some honourable exceptions, cannot be universally or implicitly relied on, "for effectual controul over the management of

the schools, or as accurate organs of communication of their actual state." A painful reflection hence arises, too generally applicable in other cases, that a disinterested disposition to give up time and ease for the public good, is seldom to be met with, proving that public spirit is at a very low ebb.

As contrasted with our school establishments in Ireland, including the ample provision of lands, for those misnamed free-schools, and the funds of the incorporated society of charter schools, as well as of the schools on private foundation, the parochial schools in Scotland, may be brought into view, as they are described by the elegant pen of Dr. Currie, in his prefatory remarks on the character of the Scottish peasantry, in the life of Burns.

"By an act of the King (James VI.) and privy council, of the 10th December 1616, it was recommended to the bishops to deale and travel with the heritors (landed proprietors) and inhabitants of the several parishes in their respective dioceses, towards the fixing upon "some certain, solid, and sure course," for setting and entertaining a school in each parish— This was ratified by a statute of Charles I. (in the year 1633) which empowered the bishop, with the consent of the heritors of a parish, or of a majority of the inhabitants, if the heritors refused to attend the meeting, to assess every plough of land (that is every farm in proportion to the number of ploughs upon it) with a certain sum for establishing a school. This was an ineffectual provision, as depending on the consent and pleasure of the heritors and inhabitants. Therefore a new order of things was introduced by an act passed in 1646, which obliges the heritors and minister of each parish to meet and assess the several heritors with the requisite sum for building a school-house, and to elect a school-master, and modify a salary for him in all time to come. The salary is ordered not to be under one hundred, nor above two hundred merks, that is, in our present sterling money, not under £5 11s. 1½d. nor above £11

2s. 3d. and the assessment is to be laid on the land in the same proportion as it is rated for the support of the clergy, and as it regulates the payment of the land tax. But in case the heritors of any parish, or the majority of them, should fail to discharge this duty, then the persons forming what is called the committee of supply of the county (consisting of the principal landholders) or any five of them, are authorised by the statute to impose the assessment instead of them, on the representation of the presbytery in which the parish is situated. To secure the choice of a proper teacher, the right of election of the heritors, by a statute passed in the year 1693, is made subject to the review and controul of the presbytery of the district; who have the examination of the person proposed committed to them, both as to his qualifications as a teacher, and as to his proper deportment in the office when settled in it. The election of the heritors is therefore only a presentment of a person, for the approbation of the presbytery: who, if they find him unfit, may declare his incapacity, and thus oblige them to elect anew.

"The legal salary of the school master was not inconsiderable at the time it was fixed; but by the decrease in the value of money, it is now certainly inadequate to its object;—and it is painful to observe, that the landholders of Scotland resisted the humble application of the schoolmasters to the legislature for its increase a few years ago. The number of parishes in Scotland is 877; and if we allow the salary of a schoolmaster in each to be, on an average, seven pounds sterling, the amount of the legal provision will be 1,6139 sterling. If we suppose the wages paid by the scholars to amount to twice this sum, which is probably beyond the truth, the total of the expenses among 1,526,492 persons (the whole population of Scotland) of this most important establishment, will be £18,417. But on this, as well as on other subjects respecting Scotland, accurate information may soon be expected from Sir John Sinclair's

Analysis of his Statistics, which will complete the immortal monument he has reared to his patriotism.

"The benefit arising in Scotland from the instruction of the poor, was soon felt; and by an act of the British parliament, 4 Geo. I. chap. vi. it is enacted, "that of the monies arising from the sale of the Scottish estates forfeited in the rebellion of 1715, £20,000 sterling shall be converted into a capital stock, the interest of which shall be laid out in erecting and maintaining schools in the Highlands." The society for promoting Christian Knowledge, incorporated in 1709, have applied a large part of their fund for the same purpose.—By their report, 1st May 1795, the annual sum employed by them, in supporting their schools in the Highlands and Islands, was 4,3913 19s. 10d in which are taught the English language, reading and writing, and the principles of religion. The schools of the society are additional to the legal schools, which, from the great extent of many of the Highland parishes were found insufficient. Besides these established schools, the lower classes of the people in Scotland, where the parishes are large, often combine together, and establish private schools of their own, at one of which it was that Burns received the principal part of his education. So convinced, indeed, are the poor people of Scotland, by experience, of the benefit of instruction to their children, that though they may often find it difficult to feed and cloathe them, some kind of school instruction they almost always procure them."

One simple principle runs through this plan. It is managed by the parishes, and though inadequate to the proper support of those schools at present, yet this establishment has already done much good, beyond all doubt, much more than the splendid and more showy apparatus of schools in Ireland, and is capable of being further extended, and worthy of being adopted, with such alterations as may be necessary to adapt it to local circumstances, as a model of similar establishments.

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